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## MULTI-LANGUAGE USE AND LINGUA FRANCA USE: TWO STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH MULTILINGUALISM IN AFRICA

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**ABSTRACT** Due to the fact that most languages are spoken by relatively small populations in Africa, a number of languages which exist are spoken side by side in any given area. It is true that lingua francas have developed in many parts of Africa to cope with this multi-lingual situation. And lingua franca use has been the subject of many of the discussions of multilingualism in Africa. But we have not fully considered other strategies to control multilingualism, particularly multi-language use, i.e. speaking multiple languages. In fact, there are areas in Africa where lingua francas have not developed or are underdeveloped, and people are obliged to speak many languages to cope with the multi-lingual situation of the area. This paper tries to balance the discussion of multilingualism in Africa, by considering multi-language use, as exemplified by Kaji (2013). It is noteworthy that successful communication among people of different linguistic backgrounds is guaranteed only when a monolingual state, realized by either lingua franca use or multi-language use, prevails in the area.

**Key Words:** Multilingualism; Monolingualism; Lingua franca; Sociolinguistics in Africa; Uganda; Nyoro.

### INTRODUCTION

In Africa, most languages are spoken by relatively small populations, and a number of languages which exist are spoken side by side in any given area. Due to this fact, people are generally multilingual and, at the same time we see many lingua francas which have developed covering almost all areas of Africa. Discussions of multilingualism in Africa have generally emphasized this use of lingua francas as an important characteristic to cope with African's multilingualism.

However, if an area does not have a lingua franca, how do people behave sociolinguistically? We have not sufficiently addressed and answered this question.

This paper aims to reconsider the sociolinguistic strategies used to cope with multilingualism in Africa, focusing particularly on multi-language use in the study conducted by Kaji (2013) on Hoima town in western Uganda, to achieve a balanced view of language use in Africa.

By lingua franca use is meant in this paper a strategy whereby people use a regional lingua franca such as Swahili, Lingala, Hausa, etc. to ensure communication among people of different languages. This solution of multilingualism is done without responding to individual local languages. Therefore, successful adoption of this strategy means that each person's linguistic repertoire is minimal two, i.e. one's own language and the lingua franca, which is used whenever talking

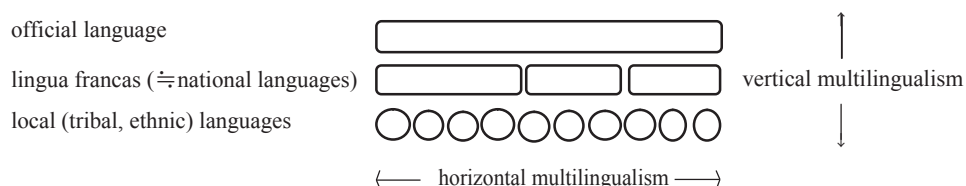
with people who speak different languages.

In contrast, multi-language use involves speaking various individual languages without resorting to lingua francas. Therefore, a person who adopts a multi-language use strategy may develop a large linguistic repertoire as, in principle, he or she deals with each language in the area individually.

The aforementioned strategies are the two extreme types to cope with multilingualism in Africa. In reality, a multitude of different patterns are practiced depending on the situation.

## MULTILINGUALISM IN AFRICA

I begin by explaining the multilingual situation in Africa. Figure 1 is a schematic image of my understanding of multilingualism in Africa. We can see that languages are layered. At the bottom are many local (ethnic, tribal, etc.) languages that are spoken in a given area (e.g., province, district, country, etc). For instance, 128 languages are said to be spoken in Tanzania, and this figure is 215 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Lewis, 2009). Even in relatively small countries, such as Uganda and Senegal, 43 and 37 languages are spoken, respectively (Lewis, 2009). This means that people are surrounded by different languages and are usually obliged to speak one or more neighboring languages to communicate with people with different linguistic backgrounds. I refer to this type of multilingualism as “horizontal multilingualism” as local languages are spoken side by side on a horizontal plane (Kaji, 2007; 2009).



**Fig. 1.** Multilingualism in Africa, a general image (Kaji, 2007; 2009)

It should be noted that even though different languages are used by different people, one does not necessarily have to speak all the surrounding languages to communicate with those who speak them. In this context, the need for so-called lingua francas arises, and many lingua francas have developed in many parts of Africa (see Fig. 2). In Tanzania, for example, one lingua franca, Swahili, covers the whole country. In the DRC, four major lingua francas, Swahili, Lingala, Luba, and Kongo, are used in such a way as to divide the country into four major lingua-franca areas. People resort to the lingua franca of the region when talking with different language groups. These lingua francas are often referred to as the national languages of the country. At times, minor lingua francas are used in a

limited area, such as Zande in the northeastern region of the DRC (and beyond the border toward Central Africa). Some ethnic languages may have become regional lingua francas that are used commonly by different language groups, such as Akan in the southern and central part of Ghana. These are varieties of lingua francas, and not addressed further in this paper.



**Fig. 2.** Main lingua francas in Africa (Heine and Derek, eds., 2000: 325)

The official language of a country sits on top of these layers of other languages, and each country usually has one official language. Although most official languages in Africa are actually former colonial languages, such as English, French, or Portuguese, some African languages have also been given the status of official languages. In Tanzania, for example, not only English but also Swahili are official languages.

The three (sometimes four or even five) layers of languages, i.e. the local lan-

guage layer, the lingua franca layer, and the official language layer, constitute layers of “vertical multilingualism.” Languages in each layer have proper functions (sometimes referred to as diglossia, triglossia, etc.), and people switch languages according to the function that various languages fulfill in social contexts (Kaji, 2007; 2009).

## MULTI-LANGUAGE USE

Although lingua francas are useful in multilingual situations, we have to know that they have not developed everywhere in Africa. Therefore, questions about how people cope with multilingualism in areas where lingua francas do not exist or have not fully developed arise from a sociolinguistic perspective. To answer this question, I will briefly discuss a case study of language use in Uganda, as described in Kaji (2013). This research, conducted in the Nyoro-speaking area of western Uganda, revealed an interesting solution to multilingualism. That is, all the people in the area were multilingual but they relied solely on their own language in their own domain. When visiting other language areas, they spoke the local language as much as they could, thereby allowing monolingualism to prevail in all areas.

### I. The language situation in Uganda

Uganda is small, but it has been reported that 43 languages are spoken in this country (Lewis, 2009). Hoima, with its population of 36,800 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2008), is the central town of the Nyoro, who occupy this area, which is the northernmost area of the Bantu zone, adjacent to the Central and Eastern Sudanic groups of the Nilo-Saharan phylum, especially the Nilotic groups of the Eastern Sudanic family.

The analysis performed by Kaji (2013) was based on data obtained through interviews conducted with 100 randomly chosen residents of Hoima city. Thus, those interviewed included young and old and men and women. The sample consisted primarily of Nyoro ( $n = 77$  of 100), but members of other ethnic groups who had lived there for various periods of time were also included: Tooro ( $n = 3$ ), Nkore ( $n = 1$ ), Kiga ( $n = 2$ ), Rwanda ( $n = 1$ ), Gungu ( $n = 3$ ), Ganda ( $n = 8$ ), Soga ( $n = 3$ ), Alur (1), and mixed<sup>(1)</sup> ( $n = 1$ ).

At the beginning of the interview, some Nyoros and some Gandas insisted that they were monolingual when simply asked, “What languages do you speak?” They said they spoke only Nyoro and Ganda, respectively. However, their answers to “What language do you use to speak to various ethnic groups of Uganda?” differed from those offered initially. For example, a 17-year-old Nyoro student initially answered that he spoke only Nyoro because he liked it; however, when he was asked “What language do you use to communicate with Ganda people?” he simply said “Ganda.” Two Gandas among the 10 interviewed first said that they spoke only Ganda, but they later revealed that they spoke Nyoro quite fluently when speaking with Nyoro individuals. Indeed no participant, either Nyoro or not,

was monolingual. In addition to Nyoro, the Nyoro interviewed spoke, in total, many other languages, such as Tooro, Nkore, Kiga, Rwanda, Konjo, Gungu, Ruli, Ganda, Soga, Acholi, Alur, Langi, and Lugbara. The average number of languages spoken by the 100 interviewed was 4.34.

On the other hand, the Nyoro interviewed said that they spoke Nyoro not only to Nyoro, but also to Tooro, Nkore, Kiga, Rwanda, Konjo, Amba, Bwisi, Gungu, Ruli, Ganda, Soga, Nyole, Acholi, Alur, Adhola, Karamojang, and Lugbara people, that is, to almost all the ethnic groups in Uganda. This fact, coupled with another finding that the various ethnic group members interviewed said that they spoke Nyoro to Nyoro people in Hoima, indicates that, in Hoima, communication proceeds in Nyoro not only among the Nyoro themselves but also between the Nyoro and the other ethnic group members living there. Indeed, even Gandas, who often say that Ganda is understood everywhere in Uganda, speak Nyoro in Hoima. The only one person who did not speak Nyoro in Hoima was a young Nkore man who came to Hoima from Kampala 6 months before the interview. He was able to make himself understood in Nkore because Nkore is very similar to Nyoro, and these two languages are mutually intelligible.<sup>(2)</sup>

Thus, in principle, the Nyoro speak Nyoro to all people in Hoima, and they speak, or at least try to speak, other peoples' languages when they go to other peoples' domains. This means that monolingualism obtains in all areas via the multilingualism of the residents, each language functioning as a common language (and eventually as a lingua franca of the area).<sup>(3)</sup> However, people cannot speak all the languages, and it is only when local ethnic languages do not work as common languages that Swahili and/or English enter the scene in Uganda.

## II. Common languages and lingua francas

A definition of lingua franca is required at this point in the discussion, and it is important to distinguish between lingua francas and common languages. A common language is any language that is used by speakers of different languages for mutual communication. Common languages are established among people of different languages in several ways. Four such patterns are shown in Figure 3. Pattern 1 shows that individual *a* uses his own language to communicate with individual *b*, whose native language is different. Pattern 2 shows the opposite pattern, in which individual *a* uses the other person's language to communicate. Pattern 3 represents a situation in which both individuals *a* and *b* speak their own language to communicate. This usually happens when two persons' languages are similar. In pattern 4, both parties use a third language known to both.

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- |    |                                 |  |
|----|---------------------------------|--|
| 1. | $a \rightarrow A \leftarrow b$  | : <i>a</i> speaking his own language <i>A</i> with <i>b</i>                  |
| 2. | $a \rightarrow B \leftarrow b$  | : <i>a</i> speaking the other person <i>b</i> 's language <i>B</i>           |
| 3. | $a \rightarrow AB \leftarrow b$ | : both <i>a</i> and <i>b</i> speak their own languages <i>A</i> and <i>B</i> |
| 4. | $a \rightarrow C \leftarrow b$  | : <i>a</i> and <i>b</i> speak a third language <i>C</i>                      |
- 

**Fig. 3.** Four modes of common languages

N.B. Capital letters *A*, *B* and *C* stand for individual languages and small letters *a*, *b* and *c* represent speakers of the corresponding languages.

Common languages are not necessarily lingua francas. Lingua francas are common languages of pattern 4 that are used by a substantial number of people in a given region. We should first note that a lingua franca is a third language that functions as a common language among people of different languages. Second, a lingua franca is a language used by a substantial number of people in a given region. Language *C* in Figure 3 functions as a common language between individuals *a* and *b*, but we cannot ascertain from this that it is a lingua franca because we do not know whether it is used by a substantial number of people in the region. Suppose a Japanese individual meets a Congolese individual in Singapore and uses French to communicate with him. In this case, French certainly functions as a common language between the two persons. However, it is not a lingua franca of the area as it is not used by a substantial number of people in the area even though it is used sporadically. In fact, English functions as the lingua franca of Singapore. In the African context, Swahili, for example, is a lingua franca because it is used by people from numerous ethnic groups as a common language. A lingua franca may have an ethnic basis, such as Hausa or Akan, and it can be a lingua franca if it is used among a substantial number of non-Hausa or non-Akan people in the area as a common language. Thus, care should be taken when referring to a language as a lingua franca as we tend to consider the big language in a given area that is spoken by various ethnic groups to be a lingua franca. However, in many cases, this big language operates as only a common language; that is, members of relatively small ethnic groups speak the other person's language which is dominant in the region.

In reference to Figure 3, we can say the following concerning the language behavior of Hoima residents. In Hoima, monolingualism functions primarily via combinations of patterns 1 and 2 of common languages. That is, Nyoro people use Nyoro to communicate with all people (pattern 1), and members of other ethnic groups who have settled there from different language areas also use Nyoro for communication with the Nyoro (pattern 2). Although apparently rare, pattern 3 is also evident; it is exemplified by the Nkore young man who continued to use his language, Nkore, to communicate with Nyoro people. Nyoro also conforms to the pattern 4 type of common language when used by non-Nyoro residents. However, it can hardly be called a lingua franca because it is used as a common language by non-Nyoro speakers only with the Nyoro's neighboring groups, such as the Tooro, the Nkore, the Gungu, and so on, just as the Nyoro use Ganda to communicate with the neighboring Soga if they do not know the Soga language.

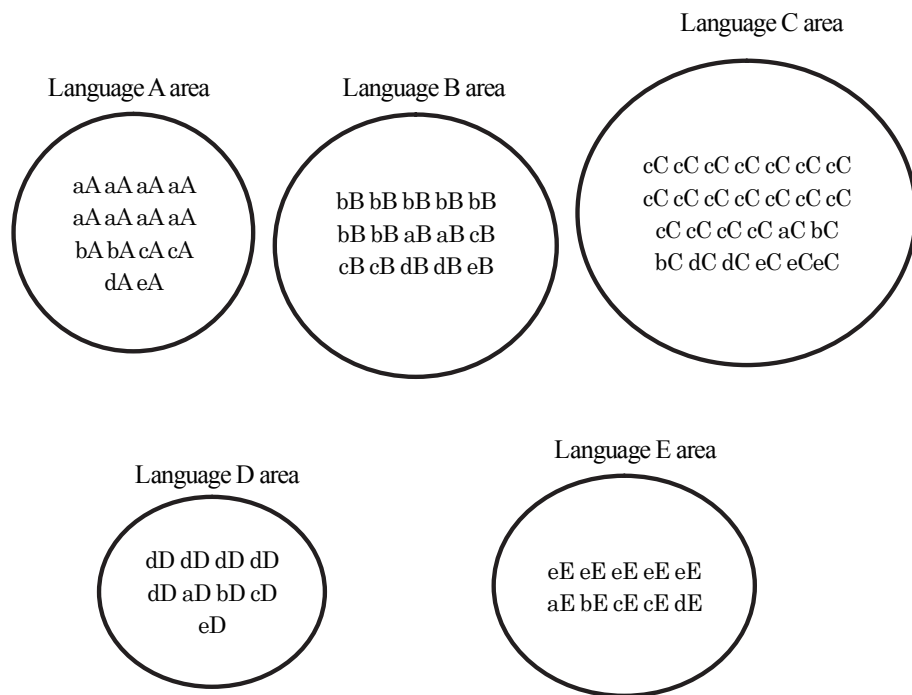
### III. Language attitudes of the Nyoro people of Hoima

We can summarize the language situation of Nyoro people in Hoima as follows (see Kaji, 2013):

- (1) All people are multilingual.
- (2) In principle, one simply speaks one's own language to everyone in one's own

domain.

- (3) In other persons' domains, one speaks the other person's language if he or she knows it. However, if the other person's language is similar to one's own, one may continue to use one's own language on the assumption that the other person also understands it.
- (4) If one does not speak the other person's language while in that other person's domain, one resorts to a third language that both he or she and the other person know. This common language used by different language groups may be English, Swahili, or local ethnic languages.
- (5) The local ethnic language used as a common language is usually a language that is similar to the other person's language.
- (6) In cases in which local ethnic languages do not serve as common languages, Swahili and/or English are usually used.



**Fig. 4.** Image of how monolingualism is realized by multilingual people

This situation is presented schematically in Figure 4 where *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, and *E* represent local ethnic languages, and the circles are their language areas. Individuals living in the areas in which languages *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, and *E* are spoken are represented by the corresponding small letters: *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, and *e*. For example, many individuals *a*'s in language area *A* speak language *A*, and they are represented as *aA*'s. Members of other language groups *B*, *C*, *D*, and *E* may also find themselves in language area *A* for one reason or another. Interestingly, they all speak language *A* when in this location. For this reason, they are represented as



$bA$ ,  $cA$ ,  $dA$ , and  $eA$  within language area  $A$ . This means that all people living in language area  $A$  speak language  $A$  regardless of their ethnic origin. Knowledge of language  $A$  is needed and is often indispensable for all people, even members of other ethnic groups, to live a normal life in language area  $A$ . What is remarkable is that monolingualism thereby prevails everywhere. In language area  $A$ , all people, regardless of their ethnic identity, speak language  $A$ . In the same way, all people in language area  $B$ , regardless of their ethnic identity, speak language  $B$ . Figure 4 is a schematized image of this situation based on generalizing the data from Hoima city. We will need verification for each linguistic domain with empirical data.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say that at least two strategies for dealing with multilingualism are found in Africa: the use of lingua francas and the use of multilinguals. The former is usually practiced in areas with functioning lingua francas, and the latter is normally found in areas where lingua francas have not developed or are underdeveloped. Most important for the purpose of efficient communication is that both cases involve monolingualism, allowing all residents of the area speaking different languages to use only one language for mutual communication.

## NOTES

- (1) In this context, “mixed” means “issued from a European father and a Nyoro mother.”
- (2) Indeed, not only Nyoro and Nkore, but also Nyoro, Tooro, Nkore, and Kiga are very similar to one another; they are sometimes referred to as Kitara after the name of the ancient kingdom in the region, implying that they constitute four dialects of one language.
- (3) See below for a discussion of common languages and lingua francas.

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